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**What Europe wanted and what Flanders achieved:  
paradoxes after 15 years Bologna and a decade of Bachelor/Master structure**

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## Introduction

This article wants to reflect on the achievements of the Flemish higher education reforms under impulse of the Bologna declaration. On a high level it is clear that Belgium in general and Flanders in particular have implemented most goals Bologna defined (Dittrich, Luwel, Frederiks, 2004).

However, there can be a difference between reforming in accordance with general goals and reforming in such a way that policy goals are actually met. It is clear that European goals can only be reached through national implementation, which is also based on national issues and identified problems. Furthermore, national legislation leaves room for higher education institutions (HEIs) to implement the educational policy and this too can flaw intended outcomes.

The question is to what extent this three-step-process leads to results on the lowest level (i.e. actual effects) that are still in accordance with the expectations on the highest level (i.e. the Bologna process)? This article wants to reflect about this gap in several issues in the Higher Education sector.

## A conceptual model of change

This article uses as starting point the change model of Pettigrew (1987; 1992) which has been used to analyze change programmes and has been based on organizational research. The model in itself has been designed to counteract the critique raised years ago that the study of organizational change in the past has been (1) ahistorical, aprocessual and acontextual in character and (2) focusing on change projects instead of focusing on the changing itself as a more holistic idea that doesn't have an isolated beginning and end. It is justified to apply this idea to the Higher Education sector since the changes that have occurred in the sector are historical, processual and contextual, and without a clear ending.

The Pettigrew model emphasizes three basic elements in the change process: context, content and process, which studies '*why* strategic change occurs with relevance to the context', '*what* strategic change is in terms of content' and '*how* change takes place in terms of process' (Stetler, Ritchie, Rycroft-Malone, Schultz and Charns, 2007). The context refers to two elements: the external environment (for instance a changing political situation) and the internal environment (as the institutionalization of an organization). The content looks into the content of the change itself, including organization's strategies, structures and systems. The process emphasizes the interventions and processes that are taking place during the change implementation (Kuipers, Higss, Kickert, Tummers, Grandia, and Van Der Voet, 2013). The figure below visualizes how change is perceived in this article and has been used before (Hondeghe, Depré, Parys & Pelgrims, 2005). Situation x is the starting position. This is actually the Higher Education System in Europe before the Bologna process 15 years ago. Situation Y is the desired outcome of the change process, while situation Y' can be seen

as the actually achieved outcome. It is obvious that intended reforms may not be achieved exactly as planned. It is exactly this issue that is at the center of the article: to what extent has Flanders achieved the desired outcomes described by Bologna in the beginning? The inner context is the internal environment and can be perceived as the willingness of the Higher Education sector to change according to the principles of the Bologna process. It is indeed the process of institutionalization of change. The inner context can also be described in structural terms (the availability of resources) and in cultural terms (the conformity of goals with the norms and values underlying higher education policy), combining insights from resource dependency theory and neo-institutional theory (Maassen & Gornitzka 1999; Gornitzka & Maassen 2006). The outer context is formed by historical, social, economic, cultural and political factors influencing the change process. This model clarifies that content, context and process aren't isolated from each other. It can be assumed that they influence each other during the change process, which makes it also clear that change is not linear, but fluctuates over time.

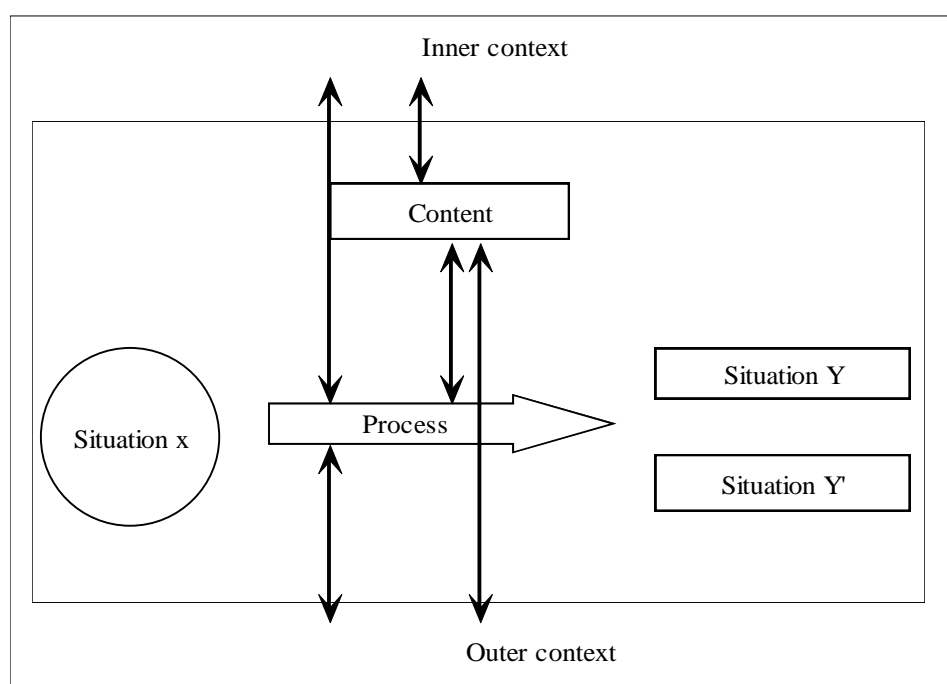


Fig. 1 Change model based on Pettigrew (Hondeghem et al., 2005)

The model will be used to analyze the Bologna process in Flanders to describe how change has been implemented, what outcomes have been achieved and how big the gap is between Y and Y'.

A last element to define in this respect, is the type of change we are dealing with. The reforms the European Higher Education sector has been confronted with is more than an organizational change process. Kuipers et al. (2013) distinguish three different types of change: first-order sub-system change, which is incremental by nature and occurs at a specific part of the organization; second-

order organization change which is organization-wide; and third-order sector change. The latter is what happens with the higher education sector in Europe: it involves an identity change, is cross-organisational, spans organizational boundaries and is a sectorwide change (Kuipers et al., 2013). As a result we can identify the Bologna process as a third-order sector change, which highlights the complexity of the process as a whole and the impact on a clearly defined region in Europe.

### **Context and research questions**

To gain insight into the Flemish implementation of a European policy agenda it is necessary to start with an overview of the policy objectives of the Bologna process. It is generally known that the principal objective of the Bologna Process, which started in 1999, was to create a more comparable, compatible and coherent system of higher education in Europe (EHEA, 2014). In that respect the Bologna declaration, originally signed by 29 countries, was the expression of the will to enhance the competitiveness of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) while maintaining the autonomy of the individual European institutions. In that declaration a commitment to the following objectives was set out (Bologna Declaration, 1999):

- The creation of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees in order to promote European citizens' employability and the international competitiveness of the European higher education system;
- The adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate.
- The establishment of a system of credits as a means of promoting student mobility;
- The promotion of mobility with particular attention for students, access to study and training opportunities and for teachers, researchers and staff;
- The promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance;
- The promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education, particularly with regard to curricular development, inter-institutional cooperation, mobility schemes and integrated programmes of study, training and research.

Since the signing of the Bologna Declaration other countries have joined, resulting in 47 countries participating now in this European project. During that time the number of objectives has increased. In 2001, the Prague Communiqué formulated goals in terms of lifelong learning, increasing the involvement of students as partners in higher education and enhancing the attractiveness and competitiveness of the EHEA (Prague Communiqué, 2001). Two years later, the Berlin Communiqué expanded the objectives by including the promotion of linking the EHEA to the European Research Area and by promotion quality assurance (Berlin Communiqué, 2003). In 2005, the Bergen Communiqué stressed the importance of partnerships together with the further enhancing of research. Also, this Communiqué emphasized the will to invest in a more accessible higher education,

together with an increased attractiveness of the EHEA to other parts of the world. The London Communiqué of 2007 focused on evaluating the progress achieved by that time. Again, two years later, the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué set out the main working areas for the next decade: social dimension, lifelong learning, employability, student centred learning and the teaching mission of education, international openness, mobility, education, research & innovation, as well as data collection, funding of higher education and multidimensional transparency tools. These working areas stressed a new orientation of the Bologna Process, towards a more in-depth approach of the reforms.

It is recognized that the Bologna Process hasn't entered the consolidation phase of the reform project yet. Because of the economic crisis the Bucharest Ministerial Conference (2012) agreed to focus on three main goals: to provide quality higher education to more students, to better equip students with employable skills and to increase student mobility. It was said that by 2020, at least 20% of graduating students in Europe should have been on a study period abroad. It now seems to be that the Bologna Process moves towards a new phase, a more in-depth one, focusing on a reduction of the implementation discrepancies in the countries forming the EHEA.

If we apply the described situation on Pettigrews model, we can come to several conclusions. First, as Bologna is clearly a third-order change, the situation  $x$  on the European level was a higher education area with an enormous diversity, efficiency loss due to that diversity, and a lack of comparability, compatibility and coherence. Second, the process, as described in Pettigrews model, has been long and hasn't ended yet. The history makes it clear that objectives have been rewritten and added during the process, and sometimes have been influenced by specific circumstances such as the economic crisis. Third, for this analysis it is necessary to select the objectives we will be focusing on and that are worthwhile exploring to see if there is a gap and how big the gap is between  $Y$  and  $Y'$ , since Flanders has used the Bologna Process as a window of opportunity to implement thorough changes in its higher education system. Therefore we will look more into detail in the fundamentals of the Bologna process: internationalization and student mobility, the two-cycle structure and the system of easily comparable degrees, quality assurance, and the modernized funding system.

Taking the theoretical framework into account, three interconnected research questions are formulated:-

- To what extent have the goals of the Bologna process yielded the desired policy effects in the specified domains, given their translation in national policies and institutional practices?
- How big is the gap between the desired outcomes and the achieved results?
- What factors can explain the observations?

## **Analyzed policy objectives**

### **1. *Quality assurance***

In the Bologna Process quality and quality assurance have become a central part of the developments Higher Education Institutions have undertaken. The building block for the quality assurance was the emphasis put on learning outcomes, thereby making a paradigm shift from teacher-centred to student-centred learning (EUA, 2014). Qualification frameworks are found at two levels in the European Higher Education Area. First, in 2005, at the ministers' meeting in Bergen, an overarching framework has been adopted. That framework has been developed by the European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA) in order to arrive at an 'agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance' and to 'explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies'. In that process, ENQA was also asked to take into account 'the expertise of other quality assurance associations and networks' (ENQA, 2009). Second, in 2010, member countries were expected to develop national qualification frameworks compatible with the overarching framework (Bologna, 2010). The overarching framework of qualifications of the European Higher Education Area was built to set the parameters within which the countries of the EHEA would develop their national qualification frameworks.

The report written in 2009 by ENQA regarding the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance concluded with several main results, recommendations and accents (ENQA, 2009):

- The set-up of European standards for internal and external quality assurance, and for external quality assurance agencies;
- The submission of European quality assurance agencies to cyclical review;
- An emphasis on subsidiarity;
- The creation of a European register of quality assurance agencies and a European Register Committee to act as a gatekeeper for the inclusion of agencies in the register;
- The establishment of a European Consultative Forum for Quality Assurance in Higher Education;
- The improvement of the consistency of quality assurance across the European Higher Education Area by the use of agreed standards and guidelines;
- The possibility for Higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies across the EHEA to use common reference points for quality assurance;
- The strengthening of procedures for the recognition of qualifications;
- The enhancement of the credibility of the work of quality assurance agencies;
- The exchange of viewpoints and experiences amongst agencies and other key stakeholders;

- A growing mutual trust among institutions and agencies and mutual recognition.

Summarizing the items mentioned above, we would identify as main objectives, on the quality assurance level, (1) the setup of a common framework to use as a reference in order to achieve comparable quality and quality standards within the Higher European Education Area, (2) the creation of a transparent structure (register, procedures, review) wherein quality assurance takes place and wherein the playing rules are identical for every institution. Those two objectives distilled from the list of recommendations is defined as situation Y in the Pettigrew model. Now, in this article, the question is to what extent the quality assurance system in Flanders is created in such a way that Y can indeed be achieved. In other words: to what extent is the Flemish situation in accordance with the European goals, to what extent is the Flemish situation contributing to that goal, and how big is the gap between Y and Y'?

The quality evaluation of the Flemish educational system is operational since 1995 (Vlaamse Regering, 2011). In general, three levels can be identified: an auto-evaluation, an external assessment and the accreditation itself. In Flanders, it is the Quality Assurance Agency of VLUHR (the Flemish Board of Universities and University Colleges) that organizes the review committees (Vlaamse Universiteiten en Hogescholenraad, 2012). The review committee uses the accreditation framework of the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organization (Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie [NVAO]). Based on the report that is produced by the visitation committee, the NVAO takes a formal decision whether or not to accredit the program (Het Hogeronderwijsregister, 2011). Recently a new accreditation system has been developed that includes not only the accreditation of a program but also an institutional accreditation, to evaluate the way an institution guarantees the quality of its education. When not accredited, an institution loses the right to act as an educational provider. The external visitation of an institution is not carried out by VLUHR but by the NVAO itself. Currently, the legislation has been finalized and should come into effect in the years to come (Vlaamse Universiteiten en Hogescholenraad, 2012).

Despite the description above, there seems to be, at national and international level, a large number of bodies involved with quality and accreditation, having an impact on Flemish higher education (Ruebens, 2012). When trying to map the various organizations, Ruebens (2012) came to a rather long list: Flemish Higher Education Council [VLHORA], the Flemish Interuniversity Council [VLIR], the Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Training [AKOV], the Dutch-Flemish accreditation organization [NVAO], The European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education [EQAR], The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education [ENQA], European Consortium for

Accreditation [ECA] and The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education [INQAAHE].

It seems to be that, because of the growing necessity of accreditation there is a trend towards specialization and proliferation of organizations in the field of quality assurance (Ruebens, 2012). Specialization can increase efficiency which could be beneficial for the accreditation, but a high degree of specialization leads frequently to excessive differentiation and fragmentation (Perri, Leat, Seltzer, & Stoker, 2002; Verhoest, Bouckaert, & Peters, 2007), negatively influencing quality and quality assurance. The former would be contributing to situation Y, while the latter would increase the gap between Y and Y'.

Ruebens (2012) has represented graphically the field of accreditation in Flanders, within a European context.

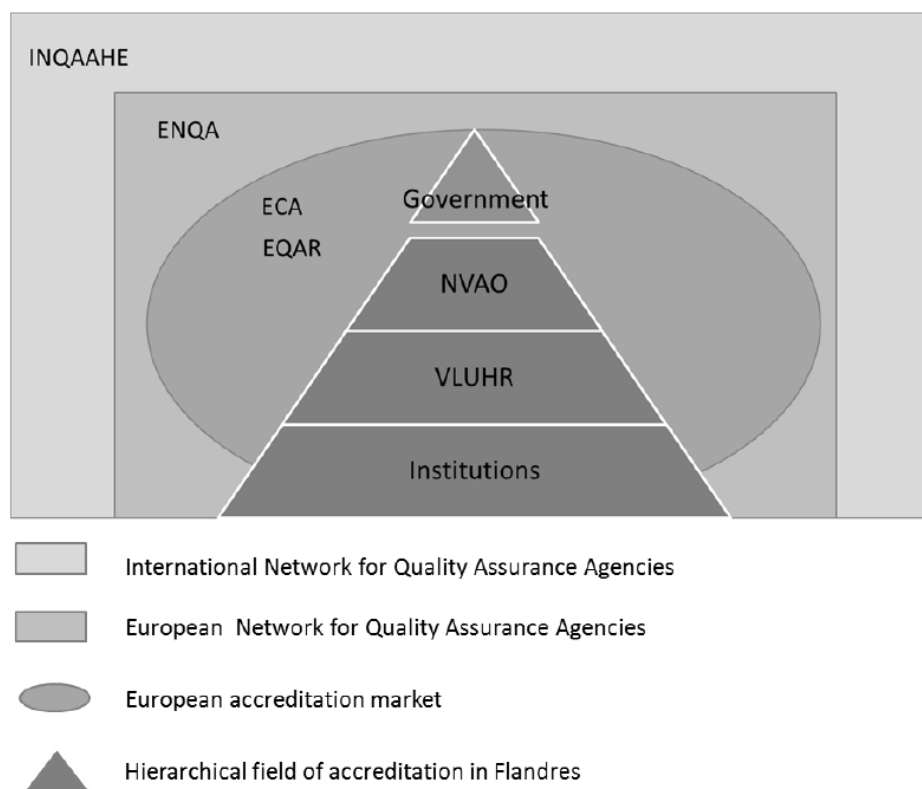


Figure 2. The context of accreditation in Flanders

The author comes to several conclusions regarding this representation (Ruebens, 2012):

- 1) The Flemish accreditation system is a hierarchical pyramid consisting of four layers: the government, the NVAO, the VLUHR and institutions. The interactions between the stakeholders are often very formal with a focus on protocols, rules and standards. The



government is on top of the pyramid: she determines the rules of the accreditation process, and can decide whether or not an institution will be funded and be able to hand out diplomas.

- 2) The NVAO has an important influential position, since she determines the guidelines for the review committees of the VLUHR. The NVAO decides whether or not an institution will be accredited, thus having an important powerful position.
- 3) Between the government, the NVAO and the VLUHR there is consultation for cooperation between the partners, about the guidelines of the accreditation system. This agreement allows the actors in the accreditation process to make suggestions about the accreditation system in order to contribute to the efficiency of the quality assurance system.
- 4) Because of the economic relevance of knowledge, the quality of education becomes more important. This stimulates an increase in the number of different quality assurance organizations at European level. The need to coordinate has been recognized in that context. This is noticeable in the recent emergence of the VLUHR as a merger of VLIR and VLHORA. From this development we can presume that in Flanders not only the need for coordination is experienced but even integration. The fusion of the two organizations should ensure that the quality assurance system is similar for all higher education institutions (Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad, 2011).
- 5) Taken into account the European level, the situation in Flanders becomes more complex: at the European level, there is a market of profession-specific accrediting bodies. This means that HEIs can pick a quality assurance agency available in the register to perform the external evaluation of its educational program. From a quality perspective, it is interesting that an institution may choose an accreditation organization with the necessary expertise. However, the question remains whether the choice is based on quality or other arguments. At the Flemish level it is known that faculties are analyzing the market of accreditation bodies to see which body is best suited to accredit their programs, and are lobbying for mutual recognition of a profession-specific accreditation body by the NVAO. The arguments used for selection are not only based on quality, but also on price, procedural easiness, expertise.
- 6) Organisations as INQAAHE and ENQA ensure cooperation between accreditation bodies. The mutual exchange of practices on the one hand ensures that national organizations can enhance their quality and, it creates a shared foundation for a common educational space(Ruebens, 2012), but on the other hand, they have an influential role since being member of those networks is essential.

As a result, given (1) the fragmentation and complexity of accreditation bodies, (2) the possibility for Flemish institutions to pick a profession-oriented accreditation body, (3) the necessity to come to a similar quality measurement by merging the VHLORA and the VLIR into the VLUHR at the Flemish level, (4) the focus on protocols, rules and standards, we can come to several conclusions. First, there is a framework wherein Flemish institutions operate and that framework is in accordance with European regulations, but as faculties are trying to find the accreditation body meeting their needs the best, it is unsure whether this is leading to a comparable quality and quality standard. Though every higher education institution uses internal quality measurement, they all tend to use a different definition of 'quality' (Dewaele, De Rynck, Wayenberg & Decramer, 2013). It also seems to be that there is a large amount of distrust against review commissions (Dewaele et al., 2013). Second, the structure at Flemish level is quite complex and inhibits the transparency of quality assurance (Ruebens, 2012; Dewaele et al., 2013). Third, it doesn't seem that the 'playing rules' are identical for everyone involved in the Flemish Higher Education: since accreditation bodies can be chosen, the financial position of institutions can play a determining role, while proving quality seems to be more important than improving quality. HEIs sense a lot of pressure to use instruments (for instance study load measurement) even when they have arguments against it (Dewaele et al., 2013).

Can we state that there is a large gap between Y and Y'? In theory the answer is negative, since structures and procedures are put in place to enhance comparable quality and transparency regarding everything that has to do with quality. In practice however, we see gaps in the implementation and factors inhibiting transparency and impeding the focus on quality. It is highly possible that, regarding the review at institutional level, discrepancies will diminish and more clarity will be put in the divergence of quality assurance. The future will determine whether Y and Y' are becoming more closely connected. But until now, it doesn't seem to be that the European objectives have led exactly to what was hoped for.

## ***2. Two-cycle structure***

One of the goals of the Bologna process was to create a system of easily readable and comparable degrees and an adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles: undergraduate and graduate. The third level would be the PhD-level. By doing so, the structure of higher education in Europe, and within Flanders, would be less complex, would enhance mobility within the European Union (Onderwijs & Vorming, 2014) and would create more transparency (Crosier and Parveva, 2013). This is what can be called situation Y. Now, when taking a look at the Flemish higher education structure, it seems that it has become more complex than a simple bachelor-master-phd structure.

Indeed, there are a lot of different educational programmes at the higher educational level in Flanders (Hogeronderwijsregister, 2014):

- 1) At the bachelor level, Flanders makes a distinction between 'profession oriented bachelors' and 'academic oriented bachelors'. The former are provided by University Colleges and aim at training students in professional competencies, the latter are provided by Universities and aim at education students in academic competencies.
- 2) At the master level, only 'academic' programmes are offered, and it is a precondition to have an academic bachelor degree to enter the master level. This isn't different than in other European countries. However, it has been made possible to move from a professional bachelor degree to a master level by enrolling first in a 'bridging programme': bridging programmes ('schakelprogramma's) are created to give the opportunity to professional bachelors to enter the university and to obtain an academic master by following first a tailored course programme, which is between 45 and 90 ECTS. It is also possible to enter an academic master programme that doesn't follow logically from the academic bachelor by taking up a preparatory programme ('voorbereidingsprogramma') which consists of some courses. Notice that bridging and preparatory programmes do not have any degree value on the market: both programmes are in between two different degrees and merely lead to a certificate.
- 3) After the professional bachelor or after the master programme, it is possible to specialize in a certain field, by following a bachelor-after-bachelor programme or a master-after-master programme.
- 4) There is a structure within the higher education to follow a 'teachers' track' which allows to enter the job market of high school teachers with an academic degree. More recently the teachers' tracks have become an integral part of the bachelor and master degree.
- 5) The PhD-level, with a PhD-programme different from faculty to faculty.
- 6) There is a large diversity which allows lifelong learning: 'lifelong learning programmes', 'postgraduates', 'summer schools', and so on.

The structure without the teachers' track and the lifelong learning is visualized below.

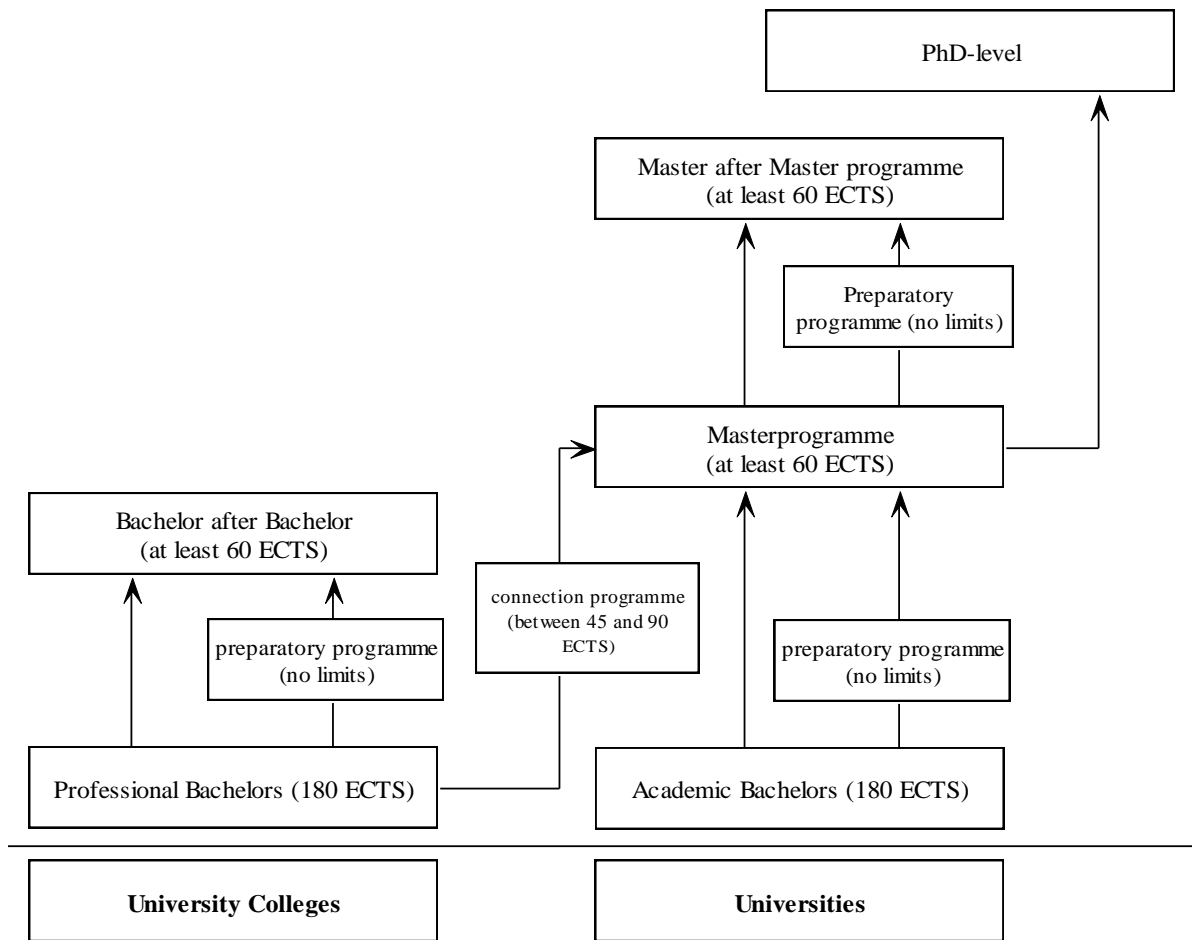


Figure 3. Higher education structure in Flanders

As can be seen, the number of possibilities seems infinite: students can switch from one system to another at different levels and periods during their studies. These possibilities enlarge the complexity of the whole higher education system, for both Flemish and international students. Given the diversity among European programmes regarding the implementation of the two-cycle structure (Crosier & Parveva, 2013), it is highly doubtful that the way Flanders has implemented contributes to a significant increase in transparency and comparability of the degrees it offers. The same probably goes for the rest of the European countries.

In 2009, there has been a report of the verification committee regarding Flemish accreditation issues and its education structure (Verification Committee, 2009). Most of the conclusions made by that committee are still valid:

- The acceptance and development of the academic Bachelor's degree needs more time as far as labour market relevance is concerned.

- There is a concern about international recognition of professional bachelor's degrees, given the emphasis on the practical component.
- International recognition of periods of study is rather problematic. There still seems to be a difference of opinion between accreditation and international recognition communities on the issue of non-recognition due to "substantial differences", especially where duration or study load is concerned. Indeed, not only the Flemish structure in itself is complex, but also the way degrees in Flanders and the way courses are shared between and recognized by the Flanders enlarges the complexity of what was said to become a transparent and comparable structure: international students can not simply come to Belgium in order to follow a program or a course/several courses for their curriculum. In 2013, EQAR concluded, with respect to the Flemish situation: "an efficient procedure of recognition with a shorter and simplified process and better cooperation between institutions can increase incoming and outgoing mobility and provide direct access to the labour market." EQAR also stated that "the recognition is not automatic since a check is required", especially for those universities that offer programs which are not recognized by an accreditation body registered in the EQAR-list (EQAR, 2013).
- Many master programmes in Flanders consist of 60 ECTS, while in many other European countries master programmes have 120 ECTS (Crosier & Parveva, 2013). This may cause problems regarding recognition.

Has Flanders implemented the stipulated goals by Bologna? Yes, but in such a way that the complexity is still large and the system hasn't become easily comparable because of the following: the equivalence check and recognition of foreign degrees isn't straightforward and the structure of the higher education in itself is not always compatible with other universities' systems. On the other hand, this structure does allow comparability and mobility, more than it did before because of the implemented instruments, such as ECTS. Flanders also has plans regarding the structure which would increase the comparability of its education with other countries: the creation of more 120 ECTS master programs, the abolishment of bridging programs, the further integration of teachers' tracks and so on. It seems to be that the gap between Y and Y' is becoming smaller because the analysis of the actual system urges to come to ameliorations.

### **3. Internationalisation**

One of the key goals of the European Union in the field of higher education has been to promote and to improve mobility, especially for students. The well-known Erasmus Programme has existed for almost thirty years now and has become known as the flagship of the EU's initiatives in higher education. It is no coincidence that the EU's current lifelong learning programme in the framework of its Education and Training 2020 objectives has been termed 'Erasmus for all'.

Capitalizing perhaps on the name and reputation of this mobility programme, the Bologna process has also adopted the promotion of mobility as one of its foremost goals right from the beginning. In the Bologna declaration the goal was defined as "Promotion of mobility by overcoming obstacles to the effective exercise of free movement". At the follow-up meeting in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve in 2009 the ministers agreed on a clear target: "In 2020, at least 20% of those graduating in the European Higher Education Area should have had a study or training period abroad". In 2012 at the follow-up meeting in Bucharest the ministers agreed on a mobility strategy for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA, 2012). The mobility strategy reiterates the target of 20% and discusses the measures needed in order to achieve this target. It states, among other things, that all countries of the European Higher Education Area should "develop and implement their own internationalisation and mobility strategies or policies with concrete aims and measurable mobility targets", that obstacles to mobility should be removed (relating to among other things adequate funding and recognition of study periods abroad), that incoming and outgoing mobility should be balanced both within the EHEA and with countries outside the EHEA, and that quality assurance and transparency tools should be used to enhance mutual trust between higher education systems and to provide clear information about professional perspectives of study programmes in the EHEA. The mobility strategy also advocates the autonomy of higher education institutions and the restriction of state regulation, calling for "the greatest possible room for manoeuvre" for higher education institutions to cooperate and set up joint programmes. With regard to the higher education institutions themselves, the mobility strategy urges them to take internationalisation and mobility seriously and to improve possibilities, also for virtual mobility and internationalisation@home.

In short, mobility has been a key component in the European cooperation in the field of education and training from the outset and has become one of its most tangible components. The Leuven/Louvain-la-neuve communiqué (2009) even calls mobility "the hallmark of the European Higher Education Area".

When we look at the policy of the Flemish Government with regard to the internationalisation of higher education, it is clear that student mobility is the main issue. Since the inception of the

Erasmus Programme, Flanders has been involved in student mobility at the European level and many course programmes were adapted to make possible the inclusion of a study period abroad. More recently, following the call in Bologna's mobility strategy, the Flemish government has issued an action plan on mobility ("brains on the move"). In that action plan issued in 2013 (Departement Onderwijs en Vorming, 2013), it confirms the European goal of having 20% higher education graduates with a mobility experience in 2020 and, moreover, sets an even more far-reaching ambition of increasing the percentage to 33%. Among the proposed measures are information and communication to students about for example the possibility of preparatory language courses, adapting the structure of curricula (a 'mobility window' in each course programme), and improving the international 'climate' of programmes (internationalisation @ home). The action plan calls for not just mobility, but a high quality mobility, to be achieved by clearly defining the learning outcomes linked to the mobility and verifying whether students have achieved the necessary competences. The action plan proposes to develop a generic system of mobility scholarships for students (that is, for all mobile students, not just for students in the Erasmus Programme) and to include financial incentives for the higher education institutions.

It must be noted, however, that the action plan has not been implemented yet and that it is as yet unclear whether the new government coalition will continue to support its implementation.

Staff mobility in principle is considered to be complimentary to student mobility by the Flemish Government, but no real action plan has as yet been drafted. There is only a proposal to focus more on researcher mobility.

Although student mobility is central to the Flemish government's internationalization policy, it is clear that the goals set out are not easily achieved. If we take for instance at the 20% goal, the actual figures currently are 9% in the non-university sector and 14% in the university sector (Departement Onderwijs en Vorming 2013, p. 5).

It should be noted that figures on mobility are in themselves problematic. There is no systematic registration of student (and staff) mobility: a national agency registers mobility within the EU's Lifelong Learning Programme (2007-2013) - which is now Erasmus+ (2014-2020) - including Erasmus Belgica and Erasmus Mundus, but not mobility of free movers or outside of these programmes (Bologna experten 2011).

But apart from the registration problem, even the available figures show that student mobility is not yet at the targeted level. In the latest stocktaking report, the Belgian system is characterized as a system with low outward mobility (EACEA et al. 2012, p. 162).

The mobility action plan (see above) states that currently 11% of graduates have a mobility experience (9% in colleges of higher education, 14% in universities). At the same time, it is acknowledged that Erasmus mobility grows only slowly (3907 Flemish students in the academic year 2010-2011, 4001 in 2011-2012 (p. 65)) and that only can be assumed that other types of mobility are increasing, leading the Flemish government somewhat optimistically to add 30% to the number of mobile students in the Erasmus Programme to arrive at the 'real' number of mobile students (p. 48).

The obstacles that impede students' mobility are well-documented (see, for instance, EUA 2010, Eurostudent 2008) and include among others a lack of financial support, a lack of language skills, a lack of motivation, and a lack of support at the participating institutions.

Next to these generally acknowledged obstacles, a number of obstacles that impede outgoing mobility seem to be specific for Flanders:

- The perceived quality of study abroad, and the relevance for one's own curriculum. Somewhat ironically the stocktaking report refers to the Belgian system as an 'attractive' system, with low outgoing student mobility but a higher number of incoming student mobility.
- It is often claimed that Flemish students have a stay-at-home mentality.

With regard to incoming mobility, the language regulations are a constant worry for higher education institutions. Under the influence of the right-wing nationalist party, the Flemish government has imposed rather strict language regulations, although the language barrier (Dutch as official language) makes Flanders sometimes less attractive for foreign students. These regulations restrict the number of courses and programmes that can be offered in a foreign language, which will confront (some) institutions with difficult choices regarding the course programmes in a foreign language they will be able to offer. Moreover, the Flemish government has decided that every teacher who teaches in another language than Dutch has to pass an official test in that particular language, much to the dislike of the higher education institutions.

Notwithstanding these issues, the number of incoming mobility is larger than that of outgoing mobility. This leads to problems for some institutions because the sheer number of incoming students is leading to practical problems (housing, availability of learning facilities, ...). Some institutions face particular problems due to their specific situation, e.g. the number of Dutch students enrolling in Antwerp.



#### **4. Funding system**

In the framework of the Bologna Process, higher education is considered a public responsibility. For instance, in the above-mentioned Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué the statement is included that “we consider public investment in higher education of utmost priority” and despite the ongoing financial crisis, the ministers put forward the aim “to ensure that higher education institutions have the necessary resources to continue to fulfil their full range of purposes”. Higher education institutions must be able to be responsive to societal needs, the communiqué contends, and therefore public funding “remains the main priority to guarantee equitable access and further sustainable development of autonomous higher education institutions”, but at the same time “greater attention should be paid to seeking new and diversified funding sources and methods”. In this way, the communiqué stages the modernization of the funding system as one of the main working areas to take the Bologna Process a step further as an in-depth reform.

A reform of the funding system has been at the forefront of higher education policy in Flanders too. A decade of reforms in the higher education system received a tentative tailpiece with the introduction of a new funding system (legislation of 2008). The restructuring of higher education and the introduction of more flexible pathways in higher education necessitated a financing mechanism adapted to this new situation. When students move more freely through the higher education structures, the sheer number of students enrolled at an institution of higher education is not an apt criterium to base the funding of that institution on. Therefore, the legislation of 2008 introduced a new mechanism for the distribution of the so-called first stream of funds of the higher education institutions, based for the largest part on output criteria and no longer counting students but credits. More in particular, the main parameters in the new funding system are the number of credits registered for by students, the number of credits they pass, the number of degrees awarded, and research parameters (doctorates, publications, citations). Also taken into account are the areas of study (receiving different weights in the financing mechanism), the kind of course programme (in principle only bachelor programmes and master programmes), the kind of contract the student enters into with the higher education institution (with a view on obtaining a degree, obtaining single course credits, or taking exams only) and target groups (an extra weighting for students with a scholarship, students with disabilities, and working students).

With the new legislation, the Flemish government confirmed the importance of public financing of higher education. The total budget was raised by an estimated 9% by 2012 and the new funding model provides, in principle, an open-ended funding envelope for the entire higher education sector. At the same time however the role of public financing was limited, as it was circumscribed as giving

students the opportunity to obtain an initial qualification, that is an initial master's degree. The financing mechanism has as its goal to motivate both students and institutions to dedicate themselves to academic success: passing credits (that is, get through course exams successfully), and obtaining a degree. With regard to institutions, the motivation should come from the funding based on output criteria, which should incite them to invest in good student guidance. With regard to the students, a 'learning account' was introduced. In the system of the learning account, each student receives 140 credits in his or her learning account. The number of credits for which a student is registered (in a bachelor or master programme) is subtracted. For one year of full-time studies, this is 60 credits. Generally speaking, you earn back the credits you pass, and lose those that you fail. The first 60 credits you pass are even earned back double. When the student obtains his master degree, 140 credits are subtracted. If credits remain in his or her learning account, the student can use these to enrol in another bachelor or master programme. If the learning account is empty but the student still wants to enrol, the institution can decide to refuse the student, or to allow the enrolment but charge double tuition fee. In other words, the learning account guarantees students the right of enrolment at a low fee as long as they have a sufficient amount of credits in their learning account. But students will have to pay a higher fee when they do not have a sufficient amount of credits in their learning account, and their enrolment might even be refused by the higher education institution. Higher education institutions are only funded for students that have a positive learning account. The learning account system (in particular, the mechanism of risking to loose credits) is meant to be an incentive for students to choose their study subject carefully, to alter their study subject as quickly as possible if needed (when they change subject early in their first year, a mechanism guarantees that the change has little or no effect on their learning account), and to perform well (and to earn back credits). For the institutions, which are partially funded on the basis of earned credits and degrees awarded, the learning account system is meant to increase their efforts to minimise dropouts and to supervise and guide students more effectively. The new funding model thus stimulates the institutions to support student achievement and progression, in particular for students from under-represented socio-economic and ethnic groups, disabled students, and working students. For these groups, an encouragement fund was established (see below), and there is also additional funding provided in the basic financing mechanism. Despite participation in higher education in Flanders is already relatively high, these groups still participate less than others and are more at risk of failing when they do enrol for a higher education programme.

More in detail, the funding of a higher education institution depends on an education part and (only for universities, not for colleges of higher education) a research part. The education part comprises a 'fixed amount' and a 'variable amount'. The fixed amount of about 106 million euro is distributed

among the institutions on the basis of the number of credits students enrol for. A minimal standard was set to exclude from funding institutions that are too small. The variable amount (currently about 889 million euro) is distributed on the basis of credits enrolled for, credits passed, and degrees awarded. For universities there is also a research part in the funding model, likewise consisting of a fixed and a variable amount, with as parameters the number of degrees awarded in the association with colleges of higher education of which the university is part, the number of doctoral degrees awarded, and the number of publications and citations.

The total funding an institution receives is awarded as a lump sum to the institution. Two exceptions were made, as the legislation provided for earmarked funding for two funds: an 'encouragement fund' (3 million euro yearly) which provided earmarked funding for each institution to set up measures with regard to the participation and performance of underrepresented groups, and a 'rationalization fund' (5 million euro yearly) which allowed institutions to submit joint rationalization plans to the government in order to receive funding to meet the additional costs brought about by rationalizing the course programme offer in a subject area. Both funds currently do no longer exist. Moreover, the current Flemish government wants to implement cuts in higher education amounting to 413 million euro. As a result, tuition fees will probably be raised (in fact, doubled), a remarkable development since Flanders has a tradition of free access to higher education. The free access system means that higher education institutions have to accept all qualified students (with the exception of the study areas of medicine, dentistry, visual and audiovisual arts, and music and performing arts). This system has resulted in a large intake of students, but at the same time it is seen as one of the reasons why graduation rates, and especially study success in the first year, are low. Policies until now have been directed on the one hand at informing (prospective) students and student counselling, to achieve the best match between student and study programme, and at structuring pathways in such a way that quick reorientation is possible in the first year. Another related problem is the rather large number of students drifting downwards in the system, that is, starting in a university course but failing and consequently getting into other types of higher education. Policies in this respect are aimed at flexible pathways through higher education (see for example the aforementioned bridging programmes and preparatory programmes).

The government does not lay down the way in which institutions must develop information activities, counselling, and flexible pathways. It provides funding to encourage the HEIs to develop their own approaches, taking into account their own context. Indeed, as we mentioned above, the flexibility that was introduced in the higher education system in 2004 was translated in the new funding system in 2008. To make this more flexible, parameter-driven funding system possible, the legislation that introduced the new funding mechanism and the learning account system, also introduced a new database, the 'Database Higher Education'. Each higher education institution has a real time

connection with this database in order to register the students' programme, courses, and results. The database is used to calculate the funding of each institution, to keep track of the number of credits in the learning account of each student, and to provide management information on, among other things, student progression and drop out (e.g. the study success in the first year of higher education broken down by study programme and previous secondary education branch of studies, is made publicly available on the website [www.onderwijskiezer.be](http://www.onderwijskiezer.be)).

Situation Y with regard to financing higher education is a continued effort on the part of the government to provide the necessary resources to guarantee equitable access of students to higher education and to guarantee the autonomy of higher education institutions.

As indicated, in Flanders such an effort has been made at the time of the introduction of the new financing system. More recently, however, the funding of higher education has come under pressure. First, the current government coalition has announced cuts in that funding, which would result in among other things diminishing the (financial) efforts for less well-represented groups in higher education and would lead to a substantial increase in tuition fees. Second, the flexibility introduced in the higher education system and supported by the financing mechanism and the learning account, has a number of unintended consequences that run counter the intended outcomes. The number of students in higher education has grown, but the number of students succeeding in higher education has not increased to the same extent. Bridging programmes are not univocally successful. The total time students need to graduate is increasing (DHO, 2014). The emphasis on output criteria in the financing mechanism has fueled concerns about lowering the education quality.

### **Conclusion: what does explain the difference between Y and Y'?**

This article has dealt with the perceived gap between the desired outcome of the Bologna process and the achieved results in Flanders. How can the abovementioned results be explained? First, the Bologna process is an ongoing process and has to some extent open-ended goals. On a high level, Flanders has, together with other European countries, met those goals. The system of quality assurance is in accordance with the general European framework; the two (or three) layer structure has been implemented; a new funding system has been created and steps towards more internationalization have been made. The inner and the outer content, according to Pettigrew's model, have made it possible for Flanders to develop her Higher Education system in such a way that those high level goals have been met.

Second, notwithstanding the successful implementation at the highest level, the actual implementation shows some clear gaps between goal and result. These gaps can be explained by elements in the inner and outer content, and by the content of the reform itself:

1. With respect to the inner context, it seems that the Higher Education system in Flanders has kept certain peculiarities which are to some extent contradictory in relation to Bologna: (1) the distinction between professional and academic bachelors, (2) the difficulties to prove equivalence between degrees which impedes internationalization, (3) the possibility to 'shop' on the accreditation bodies market where proving quality seems more important than improving quality, (4) the rather low level of internationalization and (5) the contradictory results of the Flemish funding system on the quality of its education. Those elements highlight the fact that Flanders has a long tradition of Higher Education with strong principles that are not left behind easily.
2. With respect to the outer context, we can distinguish different factors. On the political level, Flanders goes through a strong debate regarding the position of the Flemish language in its higher education. Introducing English courses and programmes isn't straightforward and is controlled severely by the Flemish government. It is clear that this language issue can not have a positive influence on student and teacher mobility. Besides, the political level has a strong impact on the future of higher education: she decides whether new programmes can be implemented, what the rules for funding and accreditation are, and so on. A highly regulated higher education system as Flanders (Broucker & De Wit, 2013) can not easily adopt a new way of doing things if Europe stipulates new paths to follow. On the economic level the market has a strong impact on the types of programmes offered by the higher education institutions. Companies and unions emphasize the importance of professional competencies, sometimes lacked by academic programmes. Introducing higher education programmes can only be done by consulting the market and therefore the labour market has a strong influence on how the higher education course programme offer is shaped. On the social level, some higher education principles have a strong impact on the conception of the Flemish situation: Flanders has an open higher education system where large entrance is made possible for all levels of society. This has an influence on the number of students that enroll, but also on the structure put in place to give equal opportunities to every student. It is also possible that new funding principles may jeopardize the level of openness of higher education.
3. The content of the reform itself has been created in such a way that a gap is 'part of the implementation' because countries and institutions have explicitly the possibility to reform their higher education taken into account local contextual factors. It is obvious that every country will have its own Y', creating within Europe diversity in homogeneity. To some extent this is necessary and fruitful for higher education within Europe: a predominant model would neglect the richness of the higher education diversity. If European students are stimulated to

study elsewhere, diversity must be kept in place. However, with regard to the Flemish situation it seems that Flanders has created some elements which impede the implementation of the European principles.

Bologna has probably entered a decade of consolidation. Flanders is improving the elements in her higher education system that seem to have failed or where lacks have been discovered. Until now however, it is unclear if the improvements will enlarge the gap between Y and Y' or whether it will make it smaller. On the European level it would be interesting to map other countries with respect to the Y- or Y'-situation.

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